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Opening extract from  
**Cosimo's Room**

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## CHAPTER ONE

For the first time, she felt unsafe in the room.

Laura half-closed her eyes. The painted walls made her feel unclean. The stained carpet disgusted her; the muddle and the mess angered her. But she had felt safe there, until then. 'Safe? As safe as using paper condoms?' she whispered.

'What's that?' The voice on the phone faded.

He had found her after five years. Kevin, with his nasal whinging, the victorious blasphemy worn like a banner, and his derision. Kevin, and his persistent egotism, as much a part of him as his dirty finger nails. She waited.

'Don't think you can escape me, girl. I'll find you wherever ...' The voice faded right away; he was on a mobile, probably stolen. '... know I will, don't you? Wherever you and Chrissy hide, I'll track you down.'

Her eyes shut tightly. The man who shared her office wouldn't understand the pain; a bachelor, married to the job. Jim was a master of police solo dancing: side step, about turn, back off and shuffle to the side. But Jim would half-kill Kevin if he heard the truth, which he must not.

Kevin was still there, clearer than before; an illusion of getting closer. He *was* near; she could almost smell his body and his hand-rolled cigarettes. A thousand and one times she had whispered: 'how could I have been so stupid?'

'I know you're still there, Laura. I can hear you breathing. You're worried, aren't you? Jesus, you should be. Still a woman cop then? That won't protect you. You know what I can do.'

'When did you come out?' Her voice was little more than a whisper. The middle of her back was hot and damp. Her scalp itched. A nerve throbbed on her temple as she waited for the next whinge.

'Found your voice then? A month ago. Weren't you counting?' He sniggered. 'Didn't have to try very hard to find you, girl. You're not

very smart, are you? Never were. Baxter again, is it? Inspector too. What did you do to get that? As if I didn't know. Slag,' he snorted. 'Jesus. What sort of copper d'you take me ... ?'

'The worst sort,' she snapped. 'An ex-cop, bent and an absolute bastard.'

Her voice had hardened; she had the measure of him again. He would never forget how she had bettered him; she wouldn't be forgiven for flying above his stinking level. He was laughing at her, then giggling like a teenager.

'Just keep away from Chrissy and me, Kevin,' Laura hissed. 'You know the judgement, and you know what it means. *No* contact. *None*. *Ever*.'

'Bollocks. I'll have it, with or without supervision, for fuck sake.' His voice had risen to an all-too familiar pitch. 'Five years is a long time, Laura bleeding Baxter. Thank your lucky stars it wasn't you who put me down. Okay, now it's my turn. For the next five years; until she's a little woman. Chrissy's my daughter as much as yours. And I'll have her, see if I don't.'

'You destroyed your chances when ...' Her heart pounded. She was losing control of her voice.

'Don't give me that magistrate's talk, woman,' he hissed. 'I'll find you. Depend on it. Won't take me long to find out where you keep her.' He laughed out loud. 'It'll be simple, Laura. Then you'll see. I mean it.'

The phone line went dead. She held the handset against her chest; the instrument was warm and familiar, but it had betrayed her. She swivelled away from where DI Phillips would be watching her solicitously, eager to speak. After one of her worst weeks ever, now this. Kevin. How easily a name can conceal the person; and how completely he had used them.

She swivelled back to the desk, slammed down the phone, and straightened her spine against the chair back, easing away the pain. Then, pushing her hands across her cheeks, over her ears and through her greasy hair, she struggled to control her shaking limbs. She had had enough. If only she could have the three-day holiday with Chrissy and Cliff, without disturbance, and perhaps some time with Dad. If only.

Was that too much to ask after a fifty-hour week? And now, Kevin.

Her eyes opened. DI Phillips was watching and waiting.

‘Something you want to tell me, Laura? Something I should know about?’ Phillips sat back with his hands clasped behind his bald head, seemingly unaware of his sweat-stained shirt. Who would like to be the back-end of a pantomime horse with him? Laura asked herself. His dry lips were open and his breathing was laboured from too many cigarettes. But he was a good colleague.

‘No. But thanks, Jim. It’s personal. I’ve got to get away. Now!’

‘Sounds heavy.’

‘It is.’ She tried to smile. ‘I’ll handle it. With a long, sharp pole.’

‘You’re a lousy liar, Maxi.’ He rubbed his grey chin and puffed his cheeks. ‘Right then. Hmm. I was saying. I’ll get the men who did-over the Asian lad.’ He coughed fluidly from the effort, and his face reddened. ‘Shit. The other cases’ll pan out, you’ll see; I know it. Now, bugger-off home.’

‘I’ll leave them in your tender loving care then.’ Laura smiled at him.

She stood, tugged at the creases in her navy skirt, and began to transfer a few papers into her case. Why bother? Why not just ignore them and switch off the phones? Then, change out of these damned clothes and into something soft and easy to wear; something Cliff would like. She needed his long, sensitive hands on her, undressing her and wanting her. But no. There was more to it now, with Kevin sniffing around.

Two uniformed officers passed the door, returned, and quickly entered. Before either could speak, Laura said: ‘I *don’t* want to know; you couldn’t find me. I’m on the way home. DI Phillips is ...’

‘Sorry, Ma’am.’ The older one was not easily diverted, as she had seen before; a good quality in other circumstances. He went on: ‘We’re under orders to get you, Ma’am. Meeting with the boss.’

‘No! I’m going *home*, and when I say ...’ She had been watching their faces; they knew she would come. ‘All right. Why? What’s happened?’

‘Ram-raid on the Danbury Estate. On your way home, he said.’

‘Is it *hell*! On my way to the moon!’ She held the eyes of the

younger constable, a head taller than her and too attractive by far. 'Where is he? The boss, not the moon.'

'Briefing room, Ma'am.' He stepped aside, smiling with too much cheek.

'Take it easy, Maxi.' Phillips picked at a tooth with a finger shaped like a twig. 'You're sure I can't do something?' He held out his other hand. 'And this came for you.'

Laura took the envelope, glanced at the company crest and name printed on the front, clamped it against the case, then looked from one constable to the other. 'A ram-raid, on Danbury, on a Friday evening? *Never*. The place is shuttered up before dusk. Who would be so dense? I *don't* believe it.'

Laura took the lead; she would not have gone to the meeting any other way, and they seemed to know it. To hell with them all. Chrissy would be safe and sound with Mrs Foster, but she would check; Kevin could be anywhere by now. She had promised that she would be home by six, without fail. She *would* fail. And damn, she had wanted to do the weekly grocery shop.

Cliff would be home though. He could collect Chrissy and feed her with something to keep her alive. They had planned to have a good evening together: the new cartoon DVD for Chrissy, followed by a film recorded late last night for her and Cliff, and some Australian wine with a big pasta meal she had put in the fridge. Cliff's favourite food, the pig. He'd been away for most of the week; not that he would have starved himself. She pushed the door.

It swung open and slammed into a desk. The briefing room was stuffy and half-full of officers. It never changed, but it should. The boss needed to be shaken from his stale routines. 'The patron saint of lost causes, much revered by the confused,' she said quietly, to nobody. Some officers were standing against the walls, most were lounging as if waiting for a darts match to start. There was nobody there she didn't know; no special officers, thank God, she thought.

Faces turned to watch her cross to the centre; their expressions suggested that they expected a confrontation with the boss. When had she become so obvious? Why disappoint them? He had it coming, as always. She stopped with her document case and the envelope under

one arm, leaving the other one free and ready.

‘I shot the messengers,’ she said, too loudly; she already had his attention.

‘You’ve come then, DI Baxter.’ The boss scowled at her, as though hoping to see someone else, then attempted a friendly smile which lacked conviction. No surprise. ‘I realise you were just going, but this is a big one for us. Gang from London; they’re loose in the town without wheels, and they’re dangerous. We have three units there. I want that gang, *to ... night*. The Met will smile upon us, for once. I need a favour.’

‘What’s the situation, please?’ Laura moved to the left, where there were fewer officers, and sat on a desk edge, whispering: ‘when didn’t he need a favour to trade? He needs a new suit and far less beer in his gut.’ And the Met didn’t smile on us; they smiled *at* us. Favours were his currency; police work was paid for that way, it seems. ‘Ram raid on Danbury, I heard? Am I right, Boss?’

‘Hmm.’ He slowly nodded, already angry at the little spikes she had used. It *is* a darts match. ‘You know the Danbury Estate, Baxter. Khan’s the post office and store. Next to ...’

‘Barclays Bank. Were they after Khan’s or Barclays?’

‘Khan’s.’ His voice mocked and his face wore a triumphant expression. ‘They’re hardly likely to ram Khan’s to do a bank job next door, Inspec ...’

‘They are if they’re from London, Boss.’

Kevin. A ram-raid was his style; his way of announcing his return. But just like him to choose the one business in Clayton which had expected a ram-raid and was ready for it.

The boss paused before continuing, with his legs wide apart and his eyes screwed up in fury. Slowly, he said: ‘Khan had some unsavoury connections in London. One of the gang was seen by a bright-eyed copper; he’s from Khan’s old borough. Wish Khan’d stayed ...’

‘The ram was a failure and the vehicle got stuck? Right?’ Laura enjoyed the man’s discomfort; a feast and common-place of late. But had she gone too far? Other officers were squirming and glancing at each other. The atmosphere was like the time she had seen a brawl in

a church. It had improved the sermon. She continued speaking. 'Khan was ready for it, Boss. He showed me. Clever man, our Mr Khan.'

'Yes ... yes, that's it.' The boss was flustered for some seconds, then tried to regain control by raising his voice, always a sign that he would quickly lose his rag. 'I want you to set-up the searches on your way home. And you're going there, N-O-W. Take over, and make sure they're covering all the likely spots. Right? Incidentally, I'm sending *you* because two women friends of Khan's were injured when the gang ran away; they slapped the women around a bit. Callous and downright nasty pieces of ...'

'Well. Let's go then. I'll catch up as I go.' She stood, pushed back her shoulders, and addressed the whole room. 'On your feet, then. They're not likely to come here looking for *us*.'

She went to speak to one of the WPCs as other officers began to leave, groaning or passing frivolous comments, being altogether too slow.

'Jenny. What do you have on the women? Badly hurt? Hospital?'

'Paramedics were there fast; as fast as rush-hour traffic would let them.' The WPC shook her head and lightly smiled. 'They're not in danger. You want someone at the hospital?'

'Correct. They might know the men. Probably do, if they've been with Khan for more than a few years. I'd like you and one other WPC there if ...'

'I can, and ... thanks, Maxi.'

'DI Baxter will do.' Laura smiled and winked at the other woman. 'Make it good, won't you. You'll find an unprovoked sex attack in this. I might know one of the men. That's his signature; thumb-print, I mean.'

The other woman nodded again; she understood. But, reaching for Laura's sleeve, she said: 'Laura. Ease up on the boss, won't you. He's none too happy.'

'A pig farmer knows exactly what he's standing in.' Laura turned away.

Then she ran towards the car park, past her office which she ignored. She wanted the action. And she might get Kevin into a dungeon with the rats. They deserved each other. The door swung

open and she ran into the early evening and a fierce wind. A sheet of newspaper had been trapped against a wheel.

Inside the car, she reached Mrs Foster. Chrissy was with her, at her house. Thank God; well safe. She'll keep her until Cliff is back, which would be any minute. She was told not to worry so; that there's nothing to worry about. But the neighbour hadn't met Kevin. Please God, she won't.

Laura ripped open the envelope, now wet from her hand. The crumpled white letter was handwritten on good quality company paper. She frowned as she read it aloud:

'I have to see you very urgently, concerning a serious crime. I can't say more; can you come to Porlock House? Jean Easton.'

They had met, but when and where?

## CHAPTER TWO

Iain had said he would return. He would have to go back to Porlock House.

Not immediately though, he decided. He'd go back in an hour; Jean Easton would still be there, working. Iain needed a beer, and there were some men he had to see. Old friends and team-mates; real friends. He glanced at the clubhouse he was passing. They'd all be there, making a real din and working hard to improve the brewer's profit.

He expected it to be hot and bright inside: a familiar place and a comfort, where they re-live their triumphs and explain away their defeats. He belonged there; he was always welcomed at the club. And his throat was dry.

Iain parked the old Landrover in two spaces, facing the main pitch. The new stand and posts were just visible; litter had blown across the grass. A lone dog-walker passed through the gloom beyond the other touchline.

The security lights on the clubhouse went out as he turned to open the car door. He stopped to stare into the impenetrable night.

What had he seen less than forty minutes ago, just before he finished work? An open umbrella was being hauled through a doorway at Porlock House, as the security light on the old library went out. It had stopped raining, and yet the person had been struggling to pull the umbrella through. Why do that?

A movement startled him. Outside the car, a hard object brushed along the bodywork; then the movement ended, beside him. Somebody had stopped against the door. But the leather coat badge was one he knew, and the rasping voice was one he expected to hear on a Friday evening or from within the pack during matches.

'Do you live in that old heap, Caldwell?' The other man's round face was brought close to the glass; his breath misted the pock-marked

skin. He yelled against a sharp gust of wind: 'I'll let you buy me a pint if you come now.' The other man backed away.

'Typical generosity of a forward,' Iain shouted back. He opened the door, slapped the other man on the arm and stood on the gravel. Iain followed him onto the wet grass, letting the wind slam the door. 'I can't remember a day when I didn't buy *you* a pint or *three*, you big ox.'

'Never. Not once, Caldwell.' The other man laughed over his shoulder.

They walked along the edge of the field that always smelled of cat pee. Leaves blew into their faces and swirled about their feet. Light shone through the clubhouse windows onto bare earth, where the grass had been worn away by spectators. They fell into talk about last week's match, that would have been replayed and reviewed in the bar all week.

'Playing tomorrow? Won't be such a good result,' offered the other man, smiling widely. 'It'll be close though.'

'Close to a massacre.' Iain laughed as he reached out for the door. 'After every success, we seem to forget the luck we had.'

'Luck? Never.'

There were twenty men in the bar, some sitting at the tables set on a dirty square of carpet, and others standing beside stained barstools. Every Friday evening, the journey from work was broken for an essential drink and a yarn. Iain saw that some of the trophy photographs had been moved. 'The new social committee's cut its teeth at last,' he remarked to one man.

'Hi Iain.' The committee chairman slapped his arm as he passed. 'Four great conversions last week. Well done. Same again tomorrow?'

'Can't make it.' Iain laughed; he was glad to miss a match for once. 'Work.' He shook his head as he walked on, smiling still and acknowledging others; it had been a very good match for him.

'A damned good result against a *far* better team,' another said.

'The opposition was single-minded; that of the captain who didn't turn up,' Iain replied, moving on. The shoulder injury had all but ruined that evening. When should he stop? He was a good fullback; they all acknowledged it.

'Evening Iain. What'll you have?' The barman placed Iain's tankard under a tap and reached for the best-bitter handle, in a well-practised move. 'Usual? Playing tomorrow?'

'Can't, I'm working.' Iain looked away, frowning.

An old golfing umbrella was leaning against a stack of crisp boxes behind the bar. He hadn't seen it there before. It was different from the one he'd seen at Porlock House; no white panels. Why would anyone drag a large, golfing umbrella into the courtyard door? It wasn't raining at the time. Why not close it outside? Or had the person been leaving, not knowing the rain had stopped? That made more sense.

'There you are old son. Climb into that.' A wet hand came out for the money. 'How's the landscaping going? Did you get that big contract?'

'Porlock House? Yes I did. And a few others too; all small and perfectly formed.' He nodded as the barman grinned. Iain added: 'I can see you're not impressed by tall stories and short truths. Fact is, there's not much landscaping around; more maintenance.' He drew on the beer, as wet change came into his outstretched right hand. 'Weekends are normally clear.'

'Hope so mate.' The barman still frowned. 'We need you.'

Iain turned away and walked into a debate about future matches. He paid little attention, and was able to move to where another group was laughing at jokes which were worth hearing again. A movement distracted him. Four people were coming from the entrance door: two men and two women. Leaves and mud came in with them.

One of the women was looking his way. He knew her walk; he had studied it for years. Slowly, he turned to face her. The smile was as wide and perfect, as ever; her hair was short now, to complement her diamond face; her green blouse and matching suit were just right. As always, he struggled to find words which would not reveal his feelings. He hadn't expected to meet her again.

'Hello Iain.' She stopped and the smile had gone. Huskily, she said: 'It's been a whole year. We've *all* missed you.'

'It's ... wonderful to see you, Fiona. How on earth ... ?'

'Chance.' Her eyes said otherwise; they controlled him, when he wasn't watching her lips. 'We moved to one of the new Georgian houses in Coldarm. But my husband wanted to join the Clayton Rugby Club.' Her smile half-formed. As close as he was, she couldn't be ignored. 'He still plays. Do you? No. Don't tell me. Another time?'

She touched his arm, lifted an eyebrow, and brushed past him. 'Make it soon?'

'And who was that?' one of the more outspoken men in the group asked, punching Iain's arm and spilling beer on the floor. 'One of your wife's oldest friends from the convent school, I suppose.'

'Yes. That's it.' Iain laughed and shook his left hand to dry it. 'How did you guess? They do needlework together on Thursdays.'

The others laughed. Two of them were looking at where Fiona was now sitting at a table with the men and the other woman. The moment had passed all too quickly. He had known Fiona for six years, and she had never been far from his thoughts. Yet, he didn't know her at all: their lips had never touched, and he had never felt her breath on his face. The desire would never go.

'Hey sunshine. There you are.' All desires fled. A man came up to his shoulder and gripped his arm. 'I got to Porlock House and you'd gone. What's up? Wanted to talk to you, mate. Another pint? On me?'

'Can't say no to that.' Iain rapidly drained the first beer and joined the other man at the bar. As his order was being placed, Iain said: 'I thought you were coming round at four. Was I wrong?'

'You weren't wrong, mate.' Reg scooped peanuts from a dish and tossed them into his wide mouth. He was one of the best garden labourers Iain could call-on, but one of the least reliable. He was a good forward too, but with less intelligence than a top player should have. 'When did you leave the site, mate?'

'About ten past five.' Iain sipped at the second pint of bitter. No match for the first. 'The place was practically deserted by then.'

'I only saw one person. That little tart who's always hanging around the place. You must have seen her riding that bike of hers.' Reg sucked at his lager then placed the glass against his shoulder. 'Sixteen, and sweet as honey. And I know why she's always hanging around. Got a man there.'

'What's the girl's name?'

'No way!' Reg wiped lager from his moustache with the back of his free hand. 'Don't think I'd tell you, do you? If there's any going, it's mine. In fact, I heard her, soon after that. She cried out. She was

having it on a groundsheet in the copse by then, I'd bet. Under that big umbrella she was carrying. Lucky bugger.'

Umbrella. She could have been hiding behind it, not wanting to be seen leaving the house by the courtyard door with the security light on. That would be it. But the light went out quickly; somebody else had tripped it on earlier?

'She can't have been in the copse! Almost impossible. Here.' Iain moved away from the bar, as he took a large drawing from his pocket then spread it on a table near the uncurtained windows. He stabbed a finger at the drawing as Reg came up to his shoulder. 'See that? We've got to clear phases one and two of the copse, quickly. More men and heavy equipment are coming next week. I've got the chain saws and hedge cutters in the shed, there.' He stabbed his finger down again. 'I'll be ready for you at eight tomorrow.' He put his glass down on the table.

Iain straightened his back and unwound a large rag from around his hand, then re-tied it; it was getting painful.

'Nasty cut you got there.' Reg frowned at the dirty, wide gash on Iain's left hand. Reg looked up. 'You ought to get something on it. How'd it happen?'

'It's nothing.' Iain looked away and fisted his hand to hold the rag in place. He pointed out the copse, which went right up to the courtyard and the old library at Porlock House. 'The little tart you spoke about. She couldn't have been in the copse, Reg. It's as tight as a duck's arse in there. Impenetrable without saws. Vicious hawthorn, brambles like trees, massive laurels, and everything else you could imagine. There's no way in, as yet.'

'If you say so. Building a hotel there; that right?' Reg touched the drawing.

'Yep. The whole copse goes, and the courtyard will become an atrium inside the hotel.' Iain began to refold the drawing; he'd had enough of ground clearance for one week. 'The hotel will go down as far as the ha-ha. We'll do some landscaping in the hayfield when we've finished clearance.'

'Good job.' Reg turned to him and hoisted the remains of the lager to his lower lip. 'Hope the money's good. I'm short on the readies, sunshine.'

‘There’ll be enough to impress that girl. Sixteen you said?’ But Reg had been drawn into a heated discussion on line-out tactics. Iain picked up his glass.

Sixteen. Anne would have been sixteen too, if she had lived. If only.

Fiona crossed the room, passed through knots of men who watched her pass by, and came up to him, her face serious. ‘Didn’t see your Morgan in the car park. I can’t believe you sold it. It was a lovely car.’

‘It’s in the garage.’ Iain shook his head then brushed hair back from his forehead. She watched the movement. He imagined that she wanted to be the one pushing back his hair. He dared not look at her for too long; he glanced behind her. ‘I’ve been working on it since I left the airline.’ The two men and the other woman stood and gathered their coats, which had been thrown over a chair. A sense of urgency and regret had arrived, making him feel nervous. Looking into her eyes again, admiring the flecks in the blue he had once tried to count, he said: ‘I hope to finish it in the spring. I hope many things.’

‘You’ve been missed, Iain,’ she whispered. ‘*Everyone* misses you.’

‘Not everyone.’ His voice was not one he knew.

‘Was it really such a big bust up?’ She touched his arm. ‘We have to go. Dinner with some friends. Long-haul flights aren’t the same without you, Iain. We *all* think so. Come back. The management made the biggest mistake ever when they let you go. And they’ve made *many* more since.’

She turned away, leaving a fragrance he hadn’t expected to enjoy again. He watched her until she had gone through the door; her hair was tangled by the wind as she turned to glance back. Iain looked until they had gone. He studied the blackness, imagining her body being folded into the seat, one hand patting strands of hair back in place, and slender fingers reaching for the seat belt.

The conversation would have moved on. Her thoughts would not be of him now, but of the evening out with friends. She would soon forget him; she would not wake next morning thinking of him.

But he would wake beside Tessa, thinking of Fiona.